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ROMANCE IN ARNOLD BENNETT

"There is a heart-cheering freedom in his speculation. The immense horizon which journeys with us lends its majesty to trifles and to matters of convenience and necessity, as to solemn and festal performances. . . . Amid littleness and detail, he detected the Genius of life, the old cunning Proteus, nestling close beside us, and showed that the dullness and prose we ascribe to the age was only another of his masks:—

'His very flight is presence in disguise.'

—that he had put off a gay uniform for a fatigue dress and was not a whit less vivacious or rich. . . ."

—Emerson on Goethe, in *Representative Men*.

I.

Arnold Bennett cannot, of course, be bracketed with Goethe. But there should be no confusion in suggesting the applicability of the words quoted above to the author of *The Roll Call*. For in *The Roll Call*, more than in the books upon which his distinction mainly rests, Mr. Bennett employs with impressive frequency words drawn from the lexicon of Romance. And one who had not already noted his recurrent use of "ecstasy", "terrifying", and "grandeur" might hastily protest that Mr. Bennett was attempting to combat the charge of being commonplace by means of a verbal hypnosis.

One of the younger English novelists, in recent lectures to American audiences, has been ridiculing Mr. Bennett's preoccupation with the commonplace. And no one has publicly demurred. A book on living English authors contains this comment on the stories of the Five Towns: "It is not that they are untrue; it is simply that the joy of living has been sucked out of them." And Mr. Darton refers in his biographical sketch of Arnold Bennett to "this passionless panorama of life" and declares: "Almost one would think that men are born old in Bursley, so little sense of wonder and ecstasy do they show. . . ."

Neither to these literary people nor to those of the reading public who aver that they recognize Mr. Bennett's merits but cannot enjoy the dreary world he represents, would it be good-

humored to respond with Mr. Bennett's own assertion that "These people seek in art a means, not of getting closer to life, but of receding from it—so mean and unlovely as life is to their unseeing eyes."

Without, however, either branding those who can see not even a paradoxical correctness in the title of this paper, or hoping to convince them of its truth, the conviction may be supported that Mr. Bennett is making honest use of the vocabulary of romance.

The obvious romantic vitality displayed in Mr. Bennett's versatile and crowded career may be a slight evidence of the perception of romance in life. At least, it indicates a temperament suited to such vision. And surely it is significant that the possessor of such a temperament is content in his serious productions so to limit his scope. Is it merely because he has admired the masters of realism? Is it not rather because, having honestly recognized that "things are so obstinately, so incurably unsentimental", he has been driven on to discover that life, mere everyday life, is an unending adventure?

That is the belief animating not only *The Roll Call*, but all of Mr. Bennett's best novels. In the romantic attitude of Robert Louis Stevenson there is a conspicuous element of make-believe, not to say pretence. He conveys the feeling that romance still frequents the places out of the way, and must be invoked by painstaking, magical arts. In a sense, it requires an even greater effort to discover the romance which Mr. Bennett proclaims. It is the effort of thought. For, discarding the ancient paraphernalia, stimulated rather than embarrassed by science, rejoicing in facts instead of pretences, Mr. Bennett reveals the romance that masks in the humdrum.

"The bizarre and trying adventure called life" appears, as he records it, to include two parallel epic actions, not separate yet distinguishable. There is the constant struggle to control one's environment, and to get on with one's associates. And there is the never-ending effort to be really in command of one's own nature.

II.

Even the grim, everyday, middle-class setting in which most of Mr. Bennett's characters struggle to establish and adjust

themselves is subtly charged with romance, none the less electric because it seldom produces a blaze. The Five Towns are smoky and ugly, and their external aspect corresponds with the narrowness and vulgarity of their inhabitants. But sometimes in the evening, when the smoke and flame belch from the chimneys at the kilns, a glamor overspreads them, and mystery seems to seek disclosure. By day also a picturesque unearthliness belongs to the baking ovens of the potteries. "Half-naked figures", when George was taken to see a saggar, "moved like ghosts, strenuous and damned . . . their hairy torsos glistening with sweat."

Less theatrical are most of the romantic features of the setting. There is an attic room where a boy secludes himself to consider architecture, a cold, barren room, but sacred because the nurturing place of his ambition. There is a cluttered office where much hard work is done, glorified by a girl's excited sense of playing, at last, a part in worldly enterprise. There is a new house where a youth's own ideas are being wrought in wood and brick to provide comfort and all the independence of a castle. The sitting-room where a dessicated old lady cherishes her prim habits and her memories is an excellent example:—

"No one could or ever would guess the depth of her attachment to that sitting-room, nor the extent to which it engrossed her emotional life. . . . The table . . . was the table at which Mrs. Maldon had taken her first meal as mistress of a house. Her husband had carved mutton at it, and grumbled about the consistency of the toast; her children had spilt jam on its cloth. And when on Sunday nights she wound up the bracket clock on the mantelpiece, she could see and hear a handsome young man in a long frock-coat and a large shirt-front and a very thin black tie winding it up too, her husband—on Sunday nights. And she could simultaneously see another handsome young man winding it up—her son."

In that description there is no idealizing, no concealing of ironic facts to make real life romantic. It makes manifest the presence of romance and irony together. This rediscovery and revelation of the compatibility of irony and romance is Mr. Bennett's high achievement.

Sometimes, as in the following description of London seen from a railroad bridge, in early morning, Mr. Bennett gives more

rein to his imagination, but never to add to or exaggerate the romance or to cover up the rawness of the actual:—

“Far below, the river was tinged with the pale blue of the sky. Big ships lay in the river as if they had never moved, and never could move; a steamer in process of painting, with her sides lifted above the water, gleamed in irregular patches of brilliant scarlet. A lively tug passed down stream, proud of her early rising. . . . Farther away the lofty chimneys sent their scarves of smoke into the air, and the vast skeletons of incipient vessels could be descried through webs of staging. The translucent freshness of the calm scene was miraculous; it divinely intoxicated the soul, and left no squalor and no ugliness anywhere.”

The same unmasking of romance furnishes the interest in Mr. Bennett's narration of the struggle that goes on within this partially romantic setting.

Controlling one's environment requires an understanding of it; and the effort to gain that understanding is romantic. Some of the Five Towns people have not only occasional “wild and painful longings to gorge . . . on the immense feast which the great romantic earth has to offer”, but a persistent yearning for wisdom. In *Hilda Lessways* it is so intense, as readers of Mr. Bennett will recall, that she steals out of the house of her entertainers after bedtime to ask an indifferent stranger if he really meant his remark that “There's no virtue in believing”.

The young man, too, Edwin, was romantically excited, as his mind and senses began to awaken to beauty. It was a wonderful experience for him to be shown the beauty of a pottery establishment in his own town. When he first listened to an exultantly competent male quartet he “was thrilled as by an exquisite and vast revelation”. And it was some brilliant dancing, that same night, that made him freshly realize his own manhood. The clog-dancer did for him and for the men of Bursley what Bennett intends to do for his readers,—“rendered back to the people in the charming form of beauty that which the instinct of the artist had taken from the sordid ugliness of the people.”

In their struggle to understand and grasp life, the people of Mr. Bennett's novels soon perceive that “the mystery of life is

intimidating." Although they realize the fact but vaguely, he shows that going "ever on a thin crust over terrific abysses" is essentially romantic. When Clayhanger received the desperate news of Hilda's early marriage, "it could be said of Edwin that he fully lived. Fate had roused him."

The romance of the struggle largely depends upon facing things as they are, accosting all the horrors, acknowledging the doubts, admitting the instincts and feeling all the conflicting emotions; in short, charging against the universe instead of taking either pious or impious refuge from it. "People", Mr. Bennett says, "who, failing to savour the struggle itself, anticipate the end of the struggle as the beginning of joy and happiness—these people are simply missing life." Clayhanger, who braced his will and maintained the struggle, found even the awful ending of his father's life and his own attendant emotions "an experience of profound and overwhelming grandeur".

From an experience so plainly tremendous down to the ringing of the telephone, all life appears to Bennett and through his aid, more than before, to many readers, a series of crises, the least of which has "the promise of some romantic new turn of existence". It follows, as the Baines family felt, that being always "equal to the situation" is a really great accomplishment.

Because it multiplies the crises and complicates the situations, responsibility is romantic. That is why Darius Clayhanger (and many another business man) was so completely and passionately absorbed in his business. The ever-lurking menaces of failure were the ornamental gargoyles on the edifice of his success. And a "going business" built up on the quicksand of pauperism was a more astounding miracle than any pleasure-dome in Xanadu.

The audacity of ventures against environment, in the effort to control it, measures the delight of execution. Few of those who try to exorcise ennui at Monte Carlo have guessed the romantic possibilities of such an enterprise as George Cannon undertook in entering, while still a minor, a national competition for the design of a municipal hall. And of course no such artificial bid for romance produces a joy comparable to his, when he looked upon the substantial realization of his daring dream.

III.

If romance depends upon the omission of the petty, the irritating and the disgusting, it is altogether out of the province of a writer who is honestly interested in common experience. Least of all does such romance appear in the daily intercourse of those whom birth or necessity forces into intimate association. But if romance consists in the play of strange, mysterious forces, in hazardous enterprises, and in crises fraught with volcanic emotions, then nothing is more romantic than that phase of the individual's struggle which concerns adjustment to those of his own household. It is a completely disguised romance. It requires the penetrating insight that Emerson praised in Goethe to recognize it. In default of that insight one may make the discovery by reading the novels of the Five Towns.

Housewives—in America, at least—do not think of the servant problem as full of romance. But Mr. Bennett shows that tense and devastating emotions are often set loose by a snarl or break in the cords binding mistress and maid. In a variety of instances in his novels the clash of feminine whims and feminine wills kindles a considerable blaze. The characters of charwomen, cooks and parlor-maids are shown to be complex: naïve but baffling, strangely crude but unexpectedly susceptible; and altogether exceedingly interesting and important. In England, at least, that is a discovery.

The relations between housewife and servant offer, however, but trifling occasions of excitement and danger in comparison with those existing between the members of a family. Mr. G. K. Chesterton has remarked that being born into a family is the most trying and romantic of adventures. Mr. Bennett, making an exception of marriage, has allowed us to observe the romance of it in the lifelike domestic associations of the Five Towns folk. It is impossible to be quite as eagerly rapt in a conflict when the reader feels sympathy with antagonist as well as protagonist, and when the latter is very much afraid, or, rather, absurd. But Mr. Bennett finds the romance of life ironical, and, by so much, the more romantic.

This preservative salt—alloy, if you please—of common-sense irony is, however, used with discretion. In one of his little lay

sermons Mr. Bennett tells us that "In the supreme things a man does not act under the rules of earthly common-sense. He transcends them because there is a quality in him which compels him to do so." Accordingly, none of the poetry is slighted in his presentation of the moments in which "all the splendid images of the past faded and were confuted and invalidated and destroyed," and "marvellous, exquisite, magical feelings" first took possession of young George Cannon. Mr. Bennett knows the much-offsetting value of the "exquisite moments", and he lets his readers feel it. The self-annihilating ecstasy of some kisses, and the mysterious potency of rare tears are expressed beyond the usual power of mere words.

Nevertheless, revealing romance in the struggles of married lovers toward adjustment is Mr. Bennett's more notable triumph. For in concentrating attention on that he is once more piercing a prosaic disguise. Common and apparently humdrum, marriage is intrinsically a "great passionate war", a risk so tremendous and so complicated that it challenges a courageous, thoughtful man. In book after book by Mr. Bennett, emerges the truth, so unfortunately hidden from many men, that the adventure of getting on happily with one woman really one's match, is more interesting as well as more arduous than any other set of sex adventures. "The task", George Cannon, of *The Roll Call*, perceived, "of satisfying the lofty and exacting and unique girl would be immense . . . he could fulfill it, but on the one condition that it monopolized his powers." After George had been married some years he was "alive to the mysterious charm of the intimacy . . . the resultant of long custom, of friction, of misunderstanding, of affection, of incomprehensible instincts, of destiny itself." And the morning when he felt it most intensely, he thought: "I have lived for this sensation, and it is worth living for."

That is the romance, with its tincture of irony, of life itself. Edwin Clayhanger's married life, seemingly so fretful and sometimes so dreary, was yet more romantic. After years of but partially successful and increasingly painful adjustments to a woman who was "a mystery within folds of mysteries", a woman so subtly domineering and so tragically unreasonable that there

was no alternative to separation from her save humiliating compromise, Edwin "thought confidently and joyously" at the culmination of the gravest crisis: "I'm not going to be beaten by Hilda! And I'm not going to be beaten by marriage. . . . A nice thing if I had to admit that I wasn't clever enough to be a husband!"

Childhood has often been romanticized. But to present without exaggeration the recurrent miracle of the unfolding relations of child and parent is a different undertaking. The following dialogue, upon the discovery that Constance, in *The Old Wives' Tale*, had conceived, unveils the ironic romance that Mr. Bennett detects in the initial intimations of parenthood:—

"Then Samuel Povey remarked, in a firm, masculine, fact-fronting tone: 'Oh, there's no doubt about it!'"

"And they glanced at each other like conspirators who have lighted a fuse and cannot take refuge in flight. Their eyes said continually, with a delicious, an enchanting mixture of ingenuous modesty and fearful joy:

" 'Well, we've gone and done it!'"

"There it was, the incredible, incomprehensible future—coming! . . . All was changed. He braced every fibre to meet destiny, and to help Constance to meet it."

Constance's child, like the others in Mr. Bennett's books, fills his home with romance not only in the "irresistible" and "cake-eating tiger" stages, but quite as much when he is a grimy, rowdy boy, part baby and part man. When Dickens gloated over children's parties and excited sympathy with childish griefs and joys, he invariably sublimated his materials. Arnold Bennett shows that, even, with the dross adhering, children are not less but more interesting, exciting and sublime.

The romance in Mr. Bennett consists of the disclosure that in the struggle flashes the excitement, in the adjustment lurks the delight, and in both tingles the thrill of life.

IV.

Of the two struggles which are distinguishable in the lives of Mr. Bennett's characters the less palpable is the fight to establish supremacy of the preferred self over body and over mind,—over instinct, passion, prejudice, fear, and the inclination to impute

to others the attendant blame. But because the effort can never be wholly successful, it is the "most interesting thing on earth".

The degree of success depends upon the degree of spiritual animation. Mr. Bennett is always fascinated by exuberant individuality. But the supreme thing is a potent, expanding, generous and purposeful character. In some measure Edwin Clayhanger acquires such a character, and, considering his native timidity, it is an extraordinary achievement. He attained it by the exercise of stoical resolution. And he made the surprising discovery that he was "happy in the stress of one immense and complex resolve", and then another.

The noblest issue of Mr. Bennett's romantic vision is his unmistakable conviction that "the miraculous and beautiful phenomenon than which nothing is more beautiful over the whole earth" is the uncompromising effort to *live* according to "the great principles spiritual and moral" which "remain absolutely intact",—carrying partially into effect, that is to say, Edwin Clayhanger's determination, "to do his best, to exhaust himself in doing his best, in living according to his conscience."

V.

The romance in Arnold Bennett is the romance of the real. It is thoughtful romance. And it is romance tintured with irony. It is that vision of human experience whereby the everyday, the commonplace, the humdrum, is seen, stripped of the wrappage of familiarity, and the danger, and mystery, and beauty, and charm of daily life are savored as keenly as those same appeals in circumstances distant, rare and strange. To most of us the main stream of individual experience seems commonplace and monotonous until we have nearly reached the uncertain ocean. Then, in retrospect, our earlier years appear somewhat purged of irony, and vividly romantic. Bennett invites us to live more imaginatively, so that we may enjoy the romance even while we feel the irony.

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